Over 14 million COVID-19 cases in South Asia

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South Asia, home to a quarter of the world's population, has seen a surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths in recent weeks. The total number cases now stand at more than 14 million, up by approximately eight percent since March 20—and over 195,000 deaths, a 3.5 percent increase in the same period.

The deadly consequences of this highly infectious disease for the region's nearly two billion inhabitants are the result of the criminal policies of South Asia's ruling elites who have placed the profit interests of big business over human life.

Having largely ignored the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, governments in South Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka—were forced to declare lockdowns in March last year. These ill-prepared lockdowns, however, did not include effective mass testing procedures, contact tracing and adequate financial resources for the underfunded public health care systems and social support for millions of workers who lost their jobs and income.

Like their counterparts internationally, these governments began giving industries the go-ahead to begin reopening in late April. Lacking any real financial support, employees were compelled to return to their workplaces, despite unsafe conditions, paving the way for the current COVID-19 surge.

India is now a regional epicentre of the pandemic, with about 88 percent of total cases and 85 percent of total deaths in South Asia. On Sunday, the daily number of infections in India hit 100,000, a new record, taking the country's total since the coronavirus struck to over 12.5 million cases with more than 165,000 deaths. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has insisted, however, that his government will not impose another national lockdown.

A recent statement from Modi's office declared that the central government would maintain its "mission-mode approach in the states and districts reporting high cases so that the collective gains of COVID-19 management over the last 15 months are not squandered." Modi's claims of "collective gains" are a fraud—the massive increase of COVID-19 cases through the country is the result of his government's policies.

The statement declared that there would be a "special campaign for COVID-appropriate behavior" from April 6–14 with "emphasis on 100 percent mask usage, personal hygiene and sanitation at public places, workplaces and health facilities." In other words, the responsibility for safe and healthy workplaces is being placed on ordinary working people, while big business maintains production and profits.

The Modi government is attempting to cover up its failure to contain the pandemic by claiming that it is carrying out the "world's largest vaccination program." The reality is that only five percent of the Indian population has received a COVID-19 vaccination.

Maharashtra remains the most seriously impacted Indian state. On Sunday, it recorded over 57,000 daily COVID-19 cases, a new state record, with Mumbai and Pune the two worst affected cities reporting 11,206 and 12,472 new cases respectively.

While Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray has been forced to declare a lockdown, all government offices and other industrial units, including construction sites, are allowed to maintain production at 50 percent capacity. This demonstrates that the Maharashtra government, a coalition of Thackeray's fascistic Shiv Sena, Indian National Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party, supported by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, has no differences with Modi's criminally inadequate

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response to the pandemic.

India's ill-equipped hospitals are being overwhelmed by the current coronavirus surge. On April 1, the BBC reported that the Kasturba Hospital, some 80 kilometres southwest of Nagpur in Maharashtra, one of India's worst hit cities, is confronting a massive crisis. "The COVID-19 ward with its 100 fewer beds," it said, "is again filling up fast—170 patients have been admitted in the last couple of weeks, and the 30-bed ICU is packed to the brim with very sick patients. Deaths are climbing."

Pakistan, which reported 5,020 daily COVID-19 cases on Sunday, has recorded 692,231 overall cases and 14,821 deaths in the past year. The more contagious UK variant is now dominant in the country. Prime Minister Imran Khan, however, has still not imposed a national lockdown.

On Sunday, Khan blandly declared that if the virus "continues to spread like this, it will have a very negative impact, and we will be forced to take strict steps." He did not elaborate on what those "strict steps" would be. So far health and administrative authorities have only imposed a partial lockdown on affected areas in Pakistan's largest province, Punjab, and in the northern part of the country.

In Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, infected patients are being turned away from hospitals because of lack of beds. On April 1, the *Dawn* newspaper reported that the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, which previously received emergency patients from across the country, could not take any more due to lack of beds.

The country's current vaccination program covers a negligible portion of the population. As of April 1, only 800,000 doses had been administered in a country of 220 million people.

In Bangladesh, the total number of coronavirus cases stands at 637,364 with 9,266 total deaths. On Friday, it recorded nearly 7,000 daily cases, the highest since the outbreak of the pandemic, with 24 percent of those tested for COVID-19 found to be infected.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to declare a weeklong lockdown starting Monday. State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain declared that "industries and factories will remain open," operating in shifts and supposedly following strict health protocols.

Bangladesh, whose underresourced hospitals are now being overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, has only vaccinated about 5.5 million people, or less than 3.5 percent of its population.

An editorial in Saturday's *Daily Star* reported that the Mugda Medical College Hospital, which is dedicated to treating COVID-19, was turning away patients because it had no vacant beds. Health Minister Zahid Malik told the media that if the surge continued, Bangladeshi hospitals will not be able to accommodate and treat patients.

Sri Lanka has reported 93,436 total cases and over 581 deaths in the past 12 months. It is currently conducting just under 10,000 tests per day, one of the lowest in the region, and less than the previous inadequate daily rate between 15,000 and 20,000 tests, despite the threat of new variants spreading in the country.

The rise in COVID-19 cases is because the Rajapakse government has insisted that government offices and industries, as well as schools, should remain open. The country's vaccination program is chaotic with just over 900,000, or less than 4.5 percent, of the population vaccinated.

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